

## COVER STORY

# the SMOKING debate

Foes use words as weapons

BY CHIP JONES

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Steve Edson is tired of hearing about the alleged evils of Big Tobacco.

"If the government wants to sue manufacturers, why don't they sue Ford for auto accidents?" asked Edson, a retired Navy commander who lives in Henrico County. "Why don't they prohibit automobiles? Why don't they not

grant drivers' licenses until people are 30?"

Gaining momentum, Edson roared along the rhetorical highway, venting frustrations about what he calls a "do-gooder" mentality infecting late 20th century America.

"Maybe they should close the fast-food restaurants because more people are dying from cholesterol," he said, "Or else the government could ration hamburgers so you only get one a month. And how about coffee? How about chocolate? How about about canned food that contains too much sugar and salt?"

Edson's list went on and on with only slightly tongue-in-cheek examples of other things the government could target instead of tobacco. He called The Times-Dispatch after reading yet-another article about Philip Morris USA's legal battles and said to the company's critics: "Tell them to attack beer."

Such feelings illustrate the tension underlying the decades-long debate over

smoking and health. It's a tension, many say, created by the clash between individual rights and government responsibility — especially when it comes to smoking, drinking, bearing arms or getting abortions.

It has sparked a war of words as each side tries to gain the rhetorical high ground: addiction vs. habit; dependency vs. personal choice; youth marketing vs. legal advertising. Whichever way you turn in the tobacco wars, someone's sure to fire a verbal bullet.

Robert Trumble, director of the Virginia Labor Studies Center at Virginia Commonwealth University, said laws regulating smoking in public and the sale of tobacco products are part of "a whole series of things that are bothersome" to many Americans.

**'It serves them right'**

Edson and others find lots of links between tobacco and other examples of what they view as government's intrusion into private matters.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**SETTLEMENT.** Scott Harshbarger of Massachusetts (left) and Bob Butterworth of Florida were among the attorneys general announcing the Liggett Group settlement.

"Man was endowed by his creator with free will," Edson said. "People who get drunk and get killed, it serves them right. If they smoke and get lung cancer, it serves them right."

Eddie Carr, a retired pilot and firefighter in Goochland County, questioned the link between smoking and lung cancer — despite more than three decades of warnings from the surgeon general. More than 400,000 Americans die each year from smoking-related diseases such as lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control.

"I think they are faking it," Carr said of the CDC's statistics.

A two-pack-a-day smoker, Carr, 73, bragged, "I have never been sick a day in my life."

Like Edson, he questions the motives of people suing Philip Morris and other tobacco companies.

**Weary of the accusations**

"The almighty dollar means everything today to the average person," he said. "If you burp in public, they want to sue you."

Patsy Hughes, a retired Philip Morris plant worker in Chesterfield County, said she's tired of hearing about tobacco companies enticing people to smoke.

"I just think it's so derogatory that people say you are made to smoke," said Hughes, a non-smoker herself. "I worked there 30 years, and was around tobacco constantly," but never took up the habit — or addiction, depending on one's point of view.

Hughes, for her part, thinks some things just can't be stopped.

"People are going to drink, smoke and have sex — those are three things you're not going to stop people from doing."

Dr. Alan Blum, a Houston health activist, said such strong views are understandable considering the history of the smoking debate.

**'Cheap and ridiculous product'**

"The health community has fallen into the trap of being morally outraged and has missed the opportunity to educate the consumer about what a cheap and ridiculous product the cigarette is," said Blum, chair-

man of Doctors Ought to Care, a group that has challenged the tobacco industry and medical groups alike.

As he treats people for lung and heart disease, Blum said he's careful in his choice of words.

"I never refer to patients as 'smokers.' I refer to them as a 'person who smokes.' I wouldn't call a person with the flu a 'flu-ik.' There's a tendency in medicine to label a person."

And in the smoking debate, labels aren't always what they seem.

Ever since Surgeon General Luther Terry warned of smoking's health hazards in 1964, Americans have been debating the best way to deal with the news.



**SMOKING FOE.** Carter Steger of the American Cancer Society says tobacco companies are good at "spinning" events.

The original "Smoking and Health" report had a careful, even dowdy tone compared to the souped-up verbiage of the late '90s.

"Cigarette smoking is a health hazard of sufficient importance in the United States to warrant appropriate remedial action," the report quietly stated.

That seems downright meek compared to the pronouncements made by various states' attorneys general on March 20 when they announced a sweeping legal settlement with Liggett Group Inc., the nation's fifth largest tobacco company.

**Admissions made for first time**

The settlement was historic because a tobacco company admitted for the first time that nicotine is "addictive" and that the tobacco industry targets underage smokers.

"This is like busting a street drug dealer to get at the Colombian drug cartel," said Minnesota Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey III.

"We believe this is the beginning of the end for this conspiracy of lies and deception that's been perpetrated on the American public by the tobacco companies," said Arizona Attorney General Grant Woods. "We got the wheel man. Now we're going to go after the bank robbers."

Anti-smoking groups, including the American Medical Association, added their own rhetorical flourishes.

**'Wall of greed and deceit'**

"Today's settlement leaves another gaping hole in the once impregnable wall of greed and deceit built by the tobacco industry," said Dr. Randolph Smoak, the AMA's secretary-treasurer. "It was a Jericho wall that led millions of Americans to their deaths, and today, Liggett has forthrightly admitted to its own responsibility and has at last agreed to help breach the wall to give us a look at the other side."

Philip Morris officials declined to be interviewed for this article.

But they issued a strongly-worded statement along with R.J. Reynolds, Brown & Williamson and Lorillard accusing Liggett's owner — Miami financier Bennett LeBow — with brokering a deal "in a desperate attempt to force one of the other cigarette manufacturers to take over his financially troubled and failing tobacco interests."

Such stark language comes with the Marlboro territory.

**Turn words to their advantage**

"Each side is trying to take a position that society supports," said Trumble, whose VCU center helps mediate management and labor disputes. "On one side, the pro-smoking people say this is choice and you want to reduce our freedoms ..."

On the nonsmoking side, he said, "They are saying we all know drugs are bad and we know this [nicotine in tobacco] is another drug."

As in any debate, Trumble said, it's natural for both sides to try to turn words to their advantage.

For example, tobacco companies have long-maintained that while smoking is "habit-forming," they have spent years — and millions of dollars for scientific studies — resisting the long-held opinion in the medical community that smoking is "addictive," just like alcohol and cocaine.

**Smoking, quitting 'a personal choice'**

Indeed, after Liggett's recent admissions, Philip Morris issued its own view of the

## Hot button words

Here are some words that pro-smoking and anti-smoking groups use to describe the same things.

## PRO

HABIT-FORMING

ADULT CHOICE

LEGAL ADVERTISING

PROHIBITION

DATA MANIPULATION

BIOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

HEALTH NAZIS

## ANTI

ADDICTIVE

DEPENDENCY

YOUTH MARKETING

TOBACCO CONTROL

STATISTICAL PROOF

CANCER

HEALTH ACTIVISTS



KERRY P. TALBOT/TIMES-DISPATCH

matter: "Over forty million smokers have quit smoking," the company said in a March 20 statement, "and smokers are not 'drug addicts.' Smoking is a personal choice, and so is quitting. These are choices made by countless numbers of individuals every day."

Trumble sees a pattern in all this verbal volleying stretching back to ancient Greece.

"This is akin to the Socratic dialogue," he said. "You get people going down a path by a choice of words."

For example, he said, "If you get people to agree on the word 'dependency,' you're going down the path of labeling nicotine as a drug. And if it's a drug then it should be restricted, then outlawed."

**Spent two years making the case**

That's an apt description of what actually happened at the Food and Drug Administration under former Commissioner David Kessler. After getting information about nicotine research at Philip Morris, Kessler's investigators and scientists spent two years making the case that nicotine is a drug.

That work culminated in the 1996 FDA regulations on tobacco products that have been challenged in federal court by the



**CEO.** Geoffrey C. Bible attacked Philip Morris critics, likening his industry to the Allies in World War II.



DON LONG/TIMES-DISPATCH

**WHAT ABOUT FREE WILL?** Steve Edson, a retired Navy commander who lives in Henrico County, believes people should take responsibility for their actions rather than sue the tobacco companies.